

HANDOUT 20

PLANNING CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Purpose	Principals, assistant principals, coaches, and lead teachers can use this tool to plan classroom observations and follow-up. The focus is on observations to help teachers improve their instruction rather than observations to evaluate teachers.
Materials	None
Media	None
Topic	Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools
Practice	Focus on Instruction

Planning Classroom Observation

This tool provides suggestions for planning observations, but does not include a form to use during the observation—there are hundreds of such forms already available. Instead, this form offers some points to consider when selecting or developing an observation form. If the leader using this tool has never conducted an observation, she or he may want to partner with a more experienced leader to prepare for the first observation.

Identify the Goals of the Observation

(Observer should complete before the observation)

Instructional guidance versus evaluation:

Teachers respond to evaluations differently than instructional guidance. To create an atmosphere of collaboration towards better instruction, the observer should clarify the goals of the observation:

- Will the observation findings go into a permanent record?
- Will the observation findings affect the teacher's salary or job assignments?

If yes, the observation is primarily focused on evaluation. This tool is not designed for evaluative observations.

If no, the observation is primarily focused on improving instruction. The observer should clarify that the observation will not affect the teacher's record, salary, or job assignments. This will help the teacher see this observation as an opportunity to work together to improve instruction.

Specific aspects of instruction that are the focus:

Before the observation, the observer should have a clear sense of what s/he wants to see. The observation might focus on time on task, the presence or quality of a specific instructional strategy (e.g., does the teacher preview a lesson?), coverage of specific content, or other aspects of instruction. The observation should focus on something that is central to the school's turnaround plan or an area that a teacher needs to work on.

Walk-through versus extended observation:

An observer can visit a classroom briefly, to check on progress and offer support, or can plan on a more extended observation, to work with a teacher on developing a specific skill or strategy. The goals of the observation will affect the duration of the observation and the detail of the notetaking.

Goals of the observation

Identify the Observer, Observed Teacher, Frequency

(Observer should complete before the observation)

Observer:

As an instructional leader of a turnaround school, the principal should be personally familiar with the instruction of each teacher. Therefore, the principal is often the observer. However, it might be appropriate to have others make observations. For example, a coach might observe instruction to help a teacher with a specific skill; a teacher leader might observe instruction to help grade-level teachers cover certain required content; or peer teachers might observe each other to share strategies for a specific unit.

Observed teacher:

All teachers should be observed. This helps build a sense of community, as teachers across the school open their classrooms to others, and to avoid a sense of criticism, which might occur were only the weakest teachers observed. However, some teachers might be observed more frequently than others (if, for example, they need coaching on a specific skill or are new to the school or the curriculum taught), and the nature of the observation might differ (some teachers, for example, might need continued support in developing a new skill and others might need another perspective on how to work with a student).

Frequency:

Observers should visit classrooms frequently (weekly or daily, depending on the situation) to establish a school atmosphere of open professional collaboration and to follow up on suggestions raised in previous observations.

Observer:

Observed teacher:

Frequency:

Record Observations

(Observer should complete during the observation)

There are hundreds of observation tools available from the web, professional development associations, schools, districts, and states, and many other sources. The observer needs to select or develop a form based on the goals of the observation. There are a few basic guidelines for selecting or developing a form:

Structured versus open-ended:

Observation forms can be very structured. For example, some might have check boxes for indicating that a behavior occurred while others record the time or the number of times a behavior occurred (e.g., time-on-task forms).

Other observation forms are open-ended. For example, a form might provide plenty of blank space to record whatever the teacher did. If the observation focuses on a specific skill that involves specific steps, a structured form is best.

If the observation focuses more broadly, an open-ended form is best. This is a continuum—many observation forms include a structured section (e.g., records of the amount of time a teacher talks versus student talk) and open-ended sections (e.g., notes on the nature of the teacher's talk and the nature of the students' talk).

High versus low inference

This refers to the level of judgment the observer uses. If the observer uses a high-inference tool, s/he will be making judgments. For example, a high-inference tool might ask an observer to decide whether the instruction “worked” or didn’t. A low-inference tool limits observer judgment. For example, a low-inference tool might ask how many times the teacher asked students questions.

Although open-ended tools tend to be high inference, structured tools can be either high or low inference. For example, a tool might have checkboxes for high-inference questions such as “Teacher covered the content” and “Positive climate in classroom.” Generally, the less experienced the observer, the more s/he would use a low-inference tool. However, even experienced observers might want to use a low-inference tool (e.g., less professional judgment) if s/he is observing something with which s/he is less familiar.

Level/subject specific

Some observation goals transcend grade or school levels and subjects (e.g., time on task). But many observation goals are only relevant to certain grades, school levels, or subjects. For example, an observation tool used for observing algebra teaching techniques will be different from an observation tool used for observing beginning reading teaching techniques. If using an existing tool, check the grade and school level and subject for which it was designed.

Further, some observation goals may be specific to a district or state. For example, observations at a school might focus on how teachers are addressing a state standard. In that case, if using an existing tool, check the district or state for which it was designed.

Observation Tool**Criteria**

Structured or open-ended:

High or low inference:

Grade/school/subject focus:

Possible tools that meet these criteria

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Provide Feedback

(Observer should complete after the observation)

Following the observation, feedback to the teacher can help him or her improve instruction. There is no single way to provide feedback, but a few elements can help make it a useful experience.

Follow up quickly

Both the observer and the teacher observed will remember the lesson better if feedback occurs soon after the observation. It may not be possible to meet right after the lesson, but aim to meet the same day if possible.

Balance the feedback

Most people are keenly interested in feedback about their performance but vulnerable to criticism. Try to recognize the things the teacher did well, as well as identify areas for improvement, to encourage the teacher.

Match the feedback to the situation

For quick walkthroughs, the feedback might be brief and based on overall impressions. For more extended observations, the feedback should refer to earlier observations or discussions, be concrete, and focused on the specific goals of the observation.

Feedback

Timing:

Strengths observed:

Areas for further work:

Follow Up

(Observer should complete after the observation)

If the observation identified an area for improvement, work with the teacher to develop a plan for follow up. The plan might involve coaching, additional materials, external professional development, or other elements. Follow up should include another observation to see if progress has been made and to provide further guidance.

Plan for Follow Up

Area for further work:

Type of follow up:

Resources/people needed:

Timeline:

Additional observations: